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ABSTRACT

In late 2002 and early 2003, Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE), working with the League of Women Voters of New York State, initiated a series of eight community public engagement forums held in Albany, Brentwood, Elmira, Rochester, Watertown, Manhattan, and Queens (New York). The public's response, discussed in this report, confirmed judicial findings and extensive social science research indicating that public schools must develop in students the high level of skills necessary for effective citizenship; yet many schools, largely as a result of inadequate funding, are currently failing to provide these skills. The report summarizes the historical goals of the public school system; the social science research on student attitudes toward and preparation for voting; jury service and other responsibilities they face; and the thoughts and ideas generated by students, teachers, parents, and other New Yorkers in improving the schools to meet these important democratic aims. It is divided into five parts: (1) "Introduction"; (2) "The Judicial Perspective"; (3) "The Social Science Research Perspective"; (4) "The Perspective of New York Students and the Public;" and (5) "Conclusion." The report is intended to raise public awareness of civic issues, offer an example of true civic engagement in practice, and to start a statewide dialogue on how adequate school funding and resources, together with other reforms, can help schools do a better job in preparing New York students to be the citizens and leaders of tomorrow. (Contains 63 notes.) (BT)

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CAMPAIGN FOR FISCAL EQUITY, INC.

TODAY'S STUDENTS, TOMORROW'S CITIZENS:

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Spring 2003

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In conjunction with the League of Women Voters of New York State

TODAY'S STUDENTS, TOMORROW'S CITIZENS:

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction i

I. **The Judicial Perspective**

A. *State Constitutions: Schools Must Prepare Students to be Capable Citizens* 1

B. *Historical Roots of the New York State Constitution's Educational Mandates* 5

II. **The Social Science Research Perspective**

A. *Capable Citizens Need High-Level Skills, Knowledge, & Civic Values* 9

B. *Inadequate Education & Civic Apathy Threaten Our Democracy* 19

III. **The Perspective of New York Students & the Public**

Input from Public Engagement On How Schools Can Better Prepare Students for Civic Engagement 27

Conclusion 35

This report was written by Michael A. Rebell, Joseph J. Wardenski, and Deborah A. Widiss of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. and Betsey Swan of the League of Women Voters of New York State.

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INTRODUCTION

The New York State Court of Appeals, the highest court in the state, will soon issue a final decision in *Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. (CFE) v. State of New York*, a landmark constitutional challenge to the current education finance system. CFE, a coalition of parent organizations, advocacy groups, and community school boards, first filed the case a decade ago in 1993. Since then, the case has progressed through the state courts, at the same time generating widespread statewide attention on the detrimental effects of inadequate school funding on New York's public school students. A favorable decision from the Court of Appeals will compel the State to adopt a new, fair education aid formula that would, for the first time, be based on actual student need.

When the Court of Appeals considers *CFE v. State* this spring, it will revisit its earlier preliminary decision, issued in 1995. In that ruling, the Court issued a tentative definition of the "sound basic education" to which all New York school children are legally entitled, and sent the case to trial to determine whether the current funding system was, in fact, unconstitutionally denying these opportunities to children in New York City and other high-need school districts in the state. The Court joined many other states in defining an adequate education as one that prepares students to be effective participants in civic society, which, it held, is a critical fundamental goal of public education. The courts in these "adequacy" cases are, in essence, revitalizing and giving contemporary meaning to the education clauses written into most state constitutions in the 18th and 19th centuries in order to create a public school system that would help fashion the new "republican character" that the founding fathers believed would be essential for the functioning of the new American democracy.

The New York Court of Appeals went one path-breaking step further than the other state courts by specifically defining civic participation in terms of voting and serving on a jury. The Court directed the trial court to review all the available evidence to determine whether or not schools were adequately preparing students for these critical democratic responsibilities.

At trial, Justice Leland DeGrasse was the first judge in the country to probe in depth the actual skills students need to be capable citizens, and the evidence presented at trial based on a compelling consensus of social scientists and educators, as well as a thoughtful consideration of the historical roots of New York's public school system greatly supported the notion that high-quality public schools are fundamental to our democracy and civic society. The trial court and an intermediate appeals court (which disputed many other aspects of Justice DeGrasse's decision) agreed that a sound basic education must prepare students for

effective civic engagement, including voting and jury service, but inclusive of a range of other civic responsibilities.

The lower courts did, however, differ on what level of skills are needed to fulfill these responsibilities: the trial court held that a high school level of skills and knowledge, in line with the State's rigorous Regents' Learning Standards, was necessary preparation for responsible citizenship, while the intermediate appeals court believed an eighth-grade level of skills to be sufficient. In issuing a final ruling on the minimal standard, the Court of Appeals will settle this question.

How well are our schools doing, and how could additional resources resulting from a victory in *CFE v. State* be used to better prepare students for civic engagement? To answer these questions, CFE turned to students themselves and members of the public in the latest series in its innovative statewide public engagement program. Since the earliest days of the lawsuit, CFE has pursued public engagement as a means of accomplishing change, using public input gained at over 100 public engagement forums in every part of the state to fashion its litigation and reform strategies. Involvement of the general public in education policy making itself represents a radical change from the status quo in New York State, where decisions are often made without public input by "three men in a room" the Governor and the two legislative leaders.

In late 2002 and early 2003, CFE, working with the League of Women Voters of New York State, initiated **"Today's Students, Tomorrow's Citizens: A Community Conversation on Civic Participation and Our Public Schools,"** a series of eight community public engagement forums held in Albany, Brentwood, Elmira, Rochester, Watertown, Manhattan, and Queens. The public's response, discussed in this report, confirms the trial court's findings and the extensive social science research: public schools must develop in students the high level of skills necessary for effective citizenship, yet many schools, largely as a result of inadequate funding, are currently failing to provide these skills. This report summarizes the historical goals of the public school system; the social science research on students' attitudes towards and preparation for voting, jury service, and the broad range of other responsibilities they will face; and the thoughts and ideas generated by students, their teachers and parents, and other New Yorkers in improving our schools to meet these important democratic aims.

This report is intended to raise public awareness of these issues, offer an example of true civic engagement in practice, and to start a statewide dialogue on how adequate school funding and resources, together with other reforms, can help schools do a better job in preparing New York students to be the citizens and leaders of tomorrow.

PART I

THE JUDICIAL PERSPECTIVE

In 1995, New York State's highest court held that all students in the State have a constitutional right to the opportunity for a "sound basic education," and tentatively defined this sound basic education in terms of the skills students would need *"to eventually function productively as civic participants capable of voting and serving on a jury."*[1] In highlighting preparation for civic participation as a major role of public schools, the New York Court of Appeals joined a growing judicial consensus of state courts that have similarly defined educational adequacy in terms of civic preparation. The definition put forward by the Court of Appeals was particularly remarkable, however, because of its unique inclusion of both *voting* and *jury service* as the primary components of civic participation.

A. STATE CONSTITUTIONS REQUIRE SCHOOLS TO PREPARE STUDENTS TO BE CAPABLE CITIZENS

The judicial focus on the purposes of public education began a half-century ago with the United States Supreme Court's historic decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed racial segregation in the public schools. In *Brown*, the Supreme Court famously held that

> [E]ducation is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society *It is the very foundation of good citizenship.*[2]

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[1] *Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. v. State of New York*, 86 N.Y.2d 307, 655 N.E.2d 661, 631 N.Y.S.2d 565, (N.Y. 1995).

[2] *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483, 493 (1954) (emphasis added).

Following the Supreme Court's lead, state courts proceeded in the latter half of the 20th century, with great consistency, to interpret education clauses in their state constitutions as requiring that public education, at a minimum, must be sufficient to prepare students for civic participation and for the competitive workplace. The Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, for example, stated that the Massachusetts constitution requires a public education system that "prepare[s] [children] to participate as free citizens of a free State,"[3] with "'sufficient understanding of governmental processes to enable the student to understand the issues that affect his or her community, state, and nation.'"[4] Indeed, some 40 states' constitutions specifically mention the importance of civic literacy among citizens, and at least 13 state constitutions have been interpreted to state that preparation for democratic citizenship is a central purpose of their educational systems.[5]

After preliminarily defining a "sound basic education," the New York Court of Appeals sent the case back for a trial to determine whether students were in fact receiving that opportunity. The Court indicated that, when the case ultimately

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[3] *McDuffy v. Secretary*, 615 N.E.2d 516, 548 (Mass. 1993)

[4] *McDuffy*, 615 N.E.2d at 554 (*quoting Rose v. Council for Better Educ.*, 790 S.W.2d 186, 212 (Ky. 1989)). Other state court decisions elaborating on the democratic role of public schools include: *Serrano v. Priest*, 487 P.2d 1241, 1258 (Cal. 1971) (education is "crucial to participation in, and the functioning of, a democracy"); *Robinson v. Cahill*, 303 A.2d 273, 295 (N.J. 1973) (thorough and efficient education required by constitution is "that educational opportunity which is needed in the contemporary setting to equip a child for his role as a citizen," as well as competitive employment); *Seattle Sch. Dist. No. 1 v. Washington*, 585 P.2d 71, 94 (Wash. 1978) (constitution requires education to provide "opportunities needed in the contemporary setting to prepare our children to participate intelligently and effectively in our open political system to ensure that system's survival"); *Claremont Sch. Dist. v. New Hampshire*, 635 A.2d 1375, 1381 (N.H. 1993) (constitution requires education to prepare "citizens for their role as participants and as potential competitors in today's marketplace of ideas"); *Campbell Sch. Dist. v. Wyoming*, 907 P.2d 1238, 1259 (Wyo. 1995) (constitution requires students to be offered "a uniform opportunity to become equipped for their future roles as citizens, participants in the political system, and competitors both economically and intellectually"); *Abbeville County Sch. Dist. v. South Carolina*, 515 S.E.2d 535, 540 (S.C. 1999) (defining adequate education as, among other things, "fundamental knowledge of history and governmental processes").

[5] Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (New York: 2003), p. 5.

returned to it on appeal, it would reevaluate its initial "template" concept of "sound basic education" and issue a final definition based on the evidence gathered at trial. The trial court, during an extensive seven-month trial, examined in depth the meaning of "civic participation" and the types of skills students need to function as capable citizens. An intermediate appeals court also considered these questions and largely agreed with the trial court on its expanded definition of "civic engagement," but sharply disagreed on the level of skills students need to be capable citizens.[6] On May 8, 2003, the Court of Appeals will hear arguments on the final appeal in *CFE v. State*. As it had anticipated eight years ago, the Court will now reconsider its initial definition and, armed with the wealth of evidence presented during trial, will issue both a conclusive definition of a "sound basic education" and a final ruling on whether all of New York's public school children are attending schools that can prepare them for the basic duties expected of them as citizens.

The New York Trial Court's Ruling

When *CFE v. State* went to trial, the judge, Justice Leland DeGrasse, took quite seriously the challenge of specifically defining the concept of civic participation put forward by the Court of Appeals. He asked the expert witnesses for both parties to begin to analyze in detail a complex ballot referendum for revising the City Charter from the previous election, as well as jury instructions and documentary evidence that had actually been introduced at trials in the New York State courts. He asked the witnesses for both sides to consider whether graduates of New York City high schools could understand these documents.

Plaintiffs' witnesses carefully analyzed the language and structure of these documents and concluded that in order to adequately understand them, students

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[6] *Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. v. State of New York*, 295 A.D. 2d 1 (2d Dep't 2002).

would need high-level cognitive skills and a good grounding in civics, history and social studies roughly at the challenging levels demanded by the state's new Regents' Learning Standards. The State's witnesses introduced polls and other social science data that indicated that most voters obtain their information from television, radio, and newspapers. These sources, they testified, generally require only eighth-grade reading skills.

Justice DeGrasse's January 2001 decision in *CFE v. State* rejected the State's implication that such a low level of skills was sufficient for effective civic participation, and instead held that high-level cognitive skills are necessary. He articulated the specific types of functions, involving such skills, for which schools need to prepare students if they are to be capable citizens:

> Productive citizenship means more than just being *qualified* to vote or serve as a juror, but to do so capably and knowledgeably. It connotes civic engagement. An engaged, capable voter needs the intellectual tools to evaluate complex issues, such as campaign finance reform, tax policy, and global warming, to name only a few.
>
> Similarly, a capable and productive citizen doesn't simply show up for jury service. Rather she is capable of serving impartially on trials that may require learning unfamiliar facts and concepts and new ways to communicate and reach decisions with her fellow jurors. To be sure, the jury is in some respects an anti-elitist institution where life experience and practical intelligence can be more important than formal education. Nonetheless, jurors may be called on to decide complex matters that require the verbal, reasoning, math, science, and socialization skills that should be imparted in public schools. Jurors today must determine questions of fact concerning DNA evidence, statistical analyses, and convoluted financial fraud, to name only three topics.[7]

In this decision, Justice DeGrasse also elaborated on the definition of productive citizenship. In addition to voting and jury service, he held, "productive

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[7] *Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. v. State of New York*, 187 Misc. 2d 1, 14 (S. Ct., N.Y. Co., 2001).

citizenship implies engagement and contribution in the economy as well as in public life," implying a much broader range of civic responsibilities for which public school students must be prepared. Any less, he wrote, "would ignore a universally understood purpose of public education."[8]

Justice DeGrasse's broad concept of "civic engagement" is fully consistent with the history of American democracy and the roots of New York's constitutional guarantee of a free public school system. The nation's founding fathers, the leaders of the common school movement, and the legislators who enacted the education clause of the New York State Constitution in 1894 all shared a conviction that education was the key to a successful democracy. We will explore this historical context in the following section.

B. HISTORICAL ROOTS OF THE NEW YORK STATE CONSTITUTION'S EDUCATION MANDATES

In embarking on the radical experiment of creating a self-governing democracy, America's founding fathers recognized that citizens would need to be able to exercise critical analytical skills in reading, writing, and oral rhetoric. Thomas Jefferson observed early on that "education is necessary to prepare citizens to participate effectively and intelligently in our open political system if we are to preserve freedom and independence."[9] Benjamin Franklin urged "that students be required to read newspapers and journals of opinions on a regular basis, and that

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[8] Ibid., pp. 14-15. As indicated above, in June 2002 an intermediate appeals court, the Appellate Division, First Department, reversed Justice DeGrasse's decision. Despite the reversal, the Appellate Division specifically affirmed the language quoted above regarding the types of functions for which students need to be prepared to be capable voters and jurors. (*Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. v. State of New York*, 295 A.D. 2d 1, 7 (1st Dep't 2002).) It concluded, however, that the level of skills "imparted between grades 8 and 9" is constitutionally sufficient. (Ibid., p. 8).

[9] Quoted by the United State Supreme Court in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205, 221 (1972).

they be incited to debate and argue over the major controversies of the day."[10] As contemporary political scientist Lorraine McDonnell explains, "[t]he original rationale for public schooling in the United States was the preparation of democratic citizens who could preserve individual freedom and engage in responsible self government."[11]

The link between schooling and civic virtue was recognized by many of the founding fathers of the American republic who expected the schools to assist in building the new nation by "the deliberate fashioning of a new republican character, rooted in the American soil and committed to the promise of an American culture."[12] Contemporary civic republicans stress the need for a democratic government to constantly reinforce the civic virtues of its people, and they continue to look to the schools to prepare young people for a life of civic engagement and responsible citizenship.[13]

The common school movement of the nineteenth century was a major advance towards achieving the democratic promise of education. As its name implies, the common school movement promoted a system of free public schools in

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[10] Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle, "What the American Founders Have to Teach Us About Schooling for Democratic Citizenship," in Lorraine M. McDonnell, P. Michael Timpane, and Roger Benjamin, eds. *Rediscovering the Democratic Purposes of Education* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), pp. 21, 30.

[11] Lorraine M. McDonnell, "Defining Democratic Purposes," in McDonnell et al., eds., *Rediscovering the Democratic Purposes of Education*, p. 1.

[12] Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), p. 3.

[13] For example, philosopher Michael J. Sandel wrote, "The public life of a republic must serve a formative role aimed at cultivating citizens of a certain kind." Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 127. Other relevant works include Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Amitai Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities, and the Communitarian Agenda* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993); and Thomas Lickona, *Educating for Character* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).

which all children whatever their class or ethnic background would be educated together. The common schools were intended to replace the hodge-podge of town schools, church schools, private schools, and pauper schools that then existed. Horace Mann, the founder of the movement, expressed the underlying democratic ideals:

> "[U]nder our republican government, it seems clear that the minimum of this education can never be less than such as sufficient to qualify each citizen for the civil and social duties he will be called to discharge, such an education as is indispensable for the civil functions of a witness or a juror; as is necessary for the voter in municipal and in national affairs; and finally, as is requisite for the faithful and conscientious discharge of all those duties which devolve upon the inheritor of a portion of the sovereignty of this great republic."[14]

Common school proponents recognized that legal reform would be necessary to ensure that the changes they implemented would be long-lasting. Accordingly, they successfully fought (in what were often fierce political battles) for language guaranteeing the establishment of common schools to be added to constitutions of states across the country, including that of New York. By the end of the nineteenth century, then, the vast majority of state constitutions included education clauses which reflected the strong democratic imperatives of the common school movement.

The New York State Constitution's requirement that the Legislature "provide for the maintenance and support of a system of *free common schools*,"[15] clearly grew out of the common school movement. It was enacted with an understanding that schools played a central role in preparing students for not only for the challenges

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[14] Horace Mann, *The Massachusetts System of Common Schools: Tenth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Board of Education* (1849), quoted in *McDuffy v. Secretary*, 615 N.E.2d 516, 555 (Mass. 1993) (Emphasis added).

[15] N.Y. Const. Art. XI, § 1.

faced by the public of that era but also for those to be faced by all future generations. As the Committee that drafted the language explained:

> Whatever may have been [the common schools'] value heretofore their importance for the future cannot be overestimated. The public problems confronting the rising generation will demand accurate knowledge and the highest development of reasoning power more than ever before; too much attention cannot be called to the fact that the highest leadership is impossible without intelligent following, and that the foundation of our educational system must be permanent, broad and firm, if the superstructure is to be of real value.[16]

Ironically, of course, at the time that Jefferson and Mann recognized democracy's critical need for an educated electorate, and, to a lesser extent, at the time that New York added the education clause to its constitution, both the franchise and access to education were greatly restricted. Throughout much of American history, those who did not own property, blacks and other minorities, and women could not vote, serve on juries or engage in other civic activities. Thus, the historic unavailability of an adequate education to many Americans had a limited effect on the functioning of the political system; most of those who were uneducated also were not permitted to participate as full citizens. Now, as our country embraces and implements a commitment to ensuring that every citizen can become an active civic participant, adequate education for all takes on even greater significance.

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[16] "Report of the Committee on Education and the Funds Pertaining Thereto (Doc. No. 62)," in *Revised Record at Constitutional Convention of 1894* (Volume 4), p. 695.

PART II

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

A. CAPABLE CITIZENS NEED HIGH-LEVEL SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE, & CIVIC VALUES

The trial court's analysis of the high level of skills students need to function capably as civic participants is supported not only by the views of the founding fathers, the history of the common school movement, and the democratic roots of America's public school system, but also by the overwhelming body of contemporary social science research on civic engagement and public education.

There is widespread agreement among educators and social scientists that effective civic participation requires:

1. ***Analytic skills*** *that enable voters and jurors to assess the significance and credibility of statements, synthesize information, and communicate effectively;*

2. ***Substantive knowledge*** *regarding the operation of government, history, geography, and economics; and*

3. *Appreciation of the* ***core civic values*** *that underlie our political structure.*

We will explore the research on each of these three key areas in this section.

Analytic and Communication Skills

As voters and jurors, citizens must assess information that they typically encounter in daily life and then use this information to make reasoned decisions. Being able to read newspaper coverage of an election is merely a prerequisite for civic participation. Likewise, knowledge of relevant context, history, and government structures is necessary but not sufficient. Educators and social scientists consistently emphasize that students need to have the analytic skills to

understand and make reasoned choices regarding the raw information they obtain. For example, a task force assembled by the Education Commission of the States, a resource center on education policy for state legislators and policy makers, identified the following analytic skills as necessary elements of a civics education:

- Communication and persuasion skills
- Problem solving and conflict resolution
- Ability to organize fellow citizens around concerns
- Critical inquiry, judgment, and reflection
- Ability to acquire information from primary and secondary sources and evaluate it for objectivity, accuracy, and point of view
- Ability to balance self interest with public interest[17]

The National Council for the Social Studies similarly identifies an effective citizen as one who has the skills to:

- Seek information from varied sources and perspectives to develop informed opinions and creative solutions;
- Ask meaningful questions and is able to analyze and evaluate information and ideas;
- Use effective decision-making and problem-solving skills in public and private life; and
- Collaborate effectively as a member of a group.[18]

The experts consistently recognize that civic participation requires an ability to assess the reliability of information received from various sources and then synthesize it to reach conclusions. Political scientists Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins recently undertook a detailed analysis of how citizens actually make

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[17] Education Commission of the States (ECS), *Every Student a Citizen: Creating the Democratic Self* (Denver, CO: 2000), p. 14.

[18] National Council for the Social Studies, Task Force on Revitalizing Citizenship Education, *Creating Effective Citizens* (May 2001), Available at databank.ncss.org/article.php?story=20020402121158431.

decisions about complex issues based on limited information.[19] They observed that "after attending to families, jobs, social commitments, and various other demands," most citizens have little time to inform themselves about current political issues at the local, state, or national level.[20] Although cues such as party membership are presented as substitutes for complex information, most political decisions and certainly service as a juror require us to choose among or between competing information sources.[21] The ability to make reasoned decisions based on limited information is therefore premised on the ability to assess the reliability of a given information source and, similarly, to recognize the bias or spin that a given commentator may bring to the presentation of an issue.[22]

Recent literacy studies confirm a strong correlation between the level of education attained and the ability to function effectively in society. Indeed, realizing the critical importance of understanding the nature and extent of literacy among the nation's adults, Congress has funded four large-scale national literacy studies: a 1985 study of young adults aged 21-25, a 1989-90 study of job seekers, and

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[19] Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins, *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Really Need to Know?* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[20] Ibid., p. 17.

[21] Ibid., pp. 60-67.

[22] Ibid., pp. 68-78. Additionally, the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB), which oversees the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), a federal nationally-administered standardized test, emphasizes that to evaluate a position, students must be able, among other things, to evaluate the source or omission of data and the reliability and relevance of evidence relied upon; to discount illogical arguments such as personal attacks, insinuation, and innuendo; and to predict accurately the probable consequences of a given position [NAGB, *Civics Framework for the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Washington, D.C.: 1998), pp. 27-28, Available at www.nagb.org/pubs/civics.pdf]. Branson and Quigley add that in addition to generally applicable synthesis skills, citizens must be able to "identify emotional language and symbols" to "discern the true purposes for which emotive language and symbols are being employed." [Margaret Stimmann Branson and Charles N. Quigley, *The Role of Civic Education,* (Washington, D.C.: The Communitarian Network, Sept. 1998), Available at www.gwu.edu/~ccps/pop_civ.html].

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studies of adults generally in both 1992 and 2002.[23] The researchers conducting each study recognized that the problem in contemporary America generally is not illiteracy that is, a complete lack of reading skills but rather an inability to understand and use information in printed materials. The studies therefore rejected earlier standards used in literacy studies, such as the ability to sign one's name or to score at a particular grade level on a reading assessment, and instead defined literacy as the ability to "us[e] printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."[24]

The studies dramatically illustrate that the skill level typically displayed by an adult with less than a high school level education is far from sufficient for effective civic participation. For example, less than a quarter of young adults with no high school education and just 41.4 percent of young adult drop-outs with some high school education demonstrated the skills required to write a basic letter explaining an error in a billing charge. More directly relevant to consideration of civic participation, 0 percent of those with no high school education and only 9.7 percent of those with some high school education but no diploma demonstrated the skills required to synthesize the main argument from a lengthy news article.[25]

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[23] A list of publications analyzing data from these studies is available on the National Assessment of Adult Literacy website at nces.ed.gov/naal/resources/resources.asp.

[24] Irwin S. Kirsch and Ann Jungeblut, *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1986), p. 3, and Irwin S. Kirsch, Ann Jungeblut, Lynn Jenkins, and Andrew Kolstad, *Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, NCES Rep. 1993-275, 3rd edition, 2002), Available at nces.ed.gov/pubs93/93275.pdf. The tests simulated "real world" tasks to assess three related but distinct skill sets identified by the experts: *prose literacy*, defined as the ability to locate and process information in texts ranging from newspaper editorials to product warranties; *document literacy*, defined as the ability to understand and use information in printed materials such as maps, schedules, and tables; and *quantitative literacy*, defined as the ability to effectively perform basic arithmetic calculations based on texts, such as figuring out a tip or balancing a check book.

[25] Kirsch and Jungeblut, *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults*, pp. 13-14; Kirsch, et al., *Adult Literacy in America*, pp. 25-27; and Carl F. Kaestle, Anne Campbell, Jeremy D. Finn, Sylvia T. Johnson, and Larry J. Mickulecky, *Adult Literacy and Education in America* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), Available at nces.ed.gov/pubs2001/2001534.pdf, pp. 15-18.

Likewise, only 11 percent of those with no high school education and 22 percent of those with some high school education demonstrated an ability to interpret a straightforward graph depicting differing sources of energy consumed in the United States over time.[26]

The researchers conducting these studies recognized that their findings, which demonstrate that there is a "significantly large segment of the population who cannot easily comprehend passages with difficulty levels comparable to typical laws, political statements, and instructions for voting," should be "cause for alarm."[27] Indeed, as explained in a passage that presages the definition of skills needed for civic participation reached by Justice DeGrasse in this case:

The "large segment of the population who cannot easily comprehend . . . typical laws, political statements, and instructions for voting," should be "cause for alarm."

> In our day, we tend to overlook the educational demands of citizenship [Yet] issues, like nuclear disarmament, the federal deficit or acid rain [require] citizens who have critical reading skills, including what Kenneth Prewitt calls "scientific savvy" not a theoretical understanding of all the areas of science involved in public policy but some skill at evaluating arguments based on statistics, some training in weighing conflicting evidence, and some understanding of the social and political context of scientific work *Literacy, beyond the basic ability to read and write, is fundamental to this democracy.*[28]

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[26] Kirsch and Jungeblut, *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults*, p. 25; Kirsch, et al., *Adult Literacy in America*, pp. 25-27; Kaestle, et al., *Adult Literacy and Education in America*, pp. 15-18.

[27] Richard L. Venezky, Carl F. Kaestle, and Andrew Sum, *The Subtle Danger: Reflections on the Literacy Abilities of America's Young Adults* (Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1987), pp. 51-52.

[28] Ibid., pp. 51-52 (emphasis added).

The evidence in the studies consistently demonstrated a strong correlation between the level of formal education and functional skill level:

> Formal education correlates strongly with higher literacy abilities at all levels and among all groups. We cannot prove from such correlations that education *causes* higher literacy abilities, but anyone who thinks that formal education only functions to hand out credentials, or that schools are failing to make a difference in people's actual functional skills must reckon with these data. They show substantial literacy gains at every increasing level of formal schooling among all groups, including males and females, racial/ethnic groups, and age groups.[29]

The literacy studies provide clear evidence that a disturbingly large portion of adults lack the basic skills they need to function effectively as civic participants and that education is an essential element of ensuring that future generations have the skills they need.

Once citizens have the requisite analytic skills, democracy depends on their ability to work together to enact policy. Being able to read jury instructions or documents submitted in evidence at a trial is only the starting point for capable jury service. Our system of peer juries requires that citizens be able to deliberate effectively to make joint decisions. Good communication skills are of critical importance in this regard. As Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn point out, effective civics education should prepare students for the strong differences and contentious debate that characterize actual democracy.[30]

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[29] Ibid., pp. xxix-xxx (emphasis original). Venezky, et al. also write that "Although the correlation does not prove a causal relationship, it is hard to imagine a successful strategy for improving future adult literacy abilities that does would ignore the importance of more and better schooling for individuals" (*Ibid.*, p. 16). Both Venezky and Kirsch also found a strong correlation between level of education attained and literacy proficiency. (*Ibid.*, pp. 34-36 and Kirsch, et al., *Adult Literacy in America*, pp. 25-27.

[30] Richard G. Niemi and Jane Junn, *Civic Education: What Makes Students Learn* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 150.

Princeton University political theorist Amy Gutmann observes that in our contemporary society,

> communicating by sound bite, competing by character assassination, and resolving political conflicts through self-seeking bargaining, log-rolling, and pork barreling too often substitute for moral deliberation on the merits. [31]

Gutmann concludes that giving students experience in discussing difficult issues in a respectful manner is essential for preparing them for democratic debate.[32]

Substantive Knowledge

Civic participation also obviously requires basic knowledge of how government operates at all levels. This civics curriculum may be learned in a variety of courses, including history, social studies, geography, economics, and government. The Framework for the NAEP Assessment lays out five key "questions" as essential:

- What are civic life, politics, and government?
- What are the foundations of the American political system?
- How does the government established by the Constitution embody the purposes, values, and principles of American democracy?
- What is the relationship of the United States to other nations and world affairs?
- What are the roles of citizens in American democracy?[33]

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[31] Amy Gutmann, "Why Should Schools Care about Civic Education?," in McDonnell, et al., eds. *Rediscovering the Democratic Purposes of Education*, pp. 73, 80.

[32] Ibid., pp. 80-82.

[33] NAGB, *Civics Framework*, pp. 18-23.

The Education Commission of the States task force identified similar key areas as necessary. The task force concluded that students must have the capacity to:

- Understand the structure and mechanics of constitutional government, political institutions and how they evolved in the history of the United States;
- Understand such democratic principles as the rule of law; majority rule; natural rights; and freedom of religion, speech and association;
- Know how ordinary citizens have acted in the past to create change;
- Understand the influences of economics, geography and social forces on politics;
- Understand and describe local problems and their connection to state and national issues; and
- Be familiar with current issues, policy questions, and potential solutions.[34]

"Education can be the vaccine that counters our common tendency to become cynical about the need for all citizens to participate as jurors."

Such content knowledge, however, is almost meaningless if students do not have the requisite intellectual skills to probe what they learn and make reasoned decisions from it. As Margaret Branson and Richard Quigley of the Center for Civic Education, which developed the Voluntary Standards, explain, "[d]emocracy is a dialogue, a discussion, a deliberative process in which citizens engage."[35]

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[34] ECS, *Every Student a Citizen*, p. 13. A similar list of knowledge areas is listed in NCSS, *Creating Effective Citizens*. Niemi and Junn also note that NAEP data reveals students particularly need instruction in the quantitative skills involved in reading charts and tables (Niemi and Junn, *Civic Education*, p. 151).

[35] Branson and Quigley, *The Role of Civic Education*, p. 4. George Wood, the former head of the Institute for Democracy in Education, further stated this point in a quote that "[W]hen politics and community are reduced to test-taking skills, schools produce spectators, not citizens." (Quoted in Erik W. Robelen, "Reengaging Young People: Educating for Democratic Life," *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) INFOBRIEF* (Number 13, June 1998), Available at http://www.ascd.org/frameinfobrief.html).

Knowledge about both the central importance and the operation of the jury system is particularly important. A 30-member task force convened by the Chief Judge of the New York Court of Appeals in 1993 to review jury service in New York State concluded that it was essential to introduce the jury process to children long before they would be called upon to serve. The task force's report urges that "[e]ducation can be the vaccine that counters our common tendency to become cynical about the need for all citizens to participate as jurors."[36] The task force concluded that education is particularly crucial for historically disenfranchised communities who tend to be under-represented on juries, often in large part because they do not respond to jury summons. As the authors of the report put it:

> Enhanced public education about jury service is a critical component and may be the critical component of ensuring an adequate flow of minority jurors in parts of the state where the number of minorities who report for jury service is disproportionate to their number in the community.[37]

Core Civic Values

Effective education must instill in students a respect for the basic premises on which our democracy is founded. For example, the broad-based ECS task force concluded that vital "civic attitudes" include that a student:

- [Believe] in liberty, equality, civil and humanitarian rights, personal responsibility, courage, diligence, fairness, honesty, trustworthiness, personal integrity;
- Recognize and respect human diversity, including the view of others;
- Consider the balance between rights and responsibilities;
- Foster the value of service and continued involvement in the community; and

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[36] The New York State Unified Court System, *The Jury Project: Report to the Chief Judge of the State of New York* (Albany, NY: March 31, 1994), p. 107.

[37] Ibid. (emphasis original).

- Believe in shared democratic values and participate in civic and political processes.[38]

NAGB likewise emphasizes that schools need to help students develop "dispositions" for civic participation such as assuming personal, political, and economic responsibilities of a citizen, participating in civic affairs, and respecting individual worth and dignity.[39]

Although many teachers in public schools shy away from explicit "values" instruction, there is widespread agreement across the political spectrum that instruction in civic attitudes and civic values is essential.[40] Since public schools often bring together a cross section of a community, they can be particularly important in instilling values of tolerance and respect for diversity.[41] Emphasizing tolerance is not merely an expression of political correctness. Rather, as Amy Gutmann posits, the procedural, constitutional, and deliberative methods of dispute resolution on which democracy depends require that civic participants "are willing and able to engage in a politics of reasoning and persuasion rather than a politics of

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[38] ECS, *Every Student a Citizen*, pp. 13-14.

[39] NAGB, *Civics Framework*, pp. 31-33.

[40] See, for example: Erik W. Robelen, "Reengaging Young People: Educating for Democratic Life," *Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) INFOBRIEF* (Number 13, June 1998), Available at http://www.ascd.org/frameinfobrief.html (advocating character education as essential and noting that prominent proponents include both liberals such as Bill Clinton and conservatives such as William Bennett); and Gutmann, "Why Should Schools Care about Civic Education?," p. 82 (describing a recent study showing "that self-identified conservatives, moderates, and liberals all share a core set of convictions about citizenship education that include the following: encouraging toleration and open-mindedness, addressing controversial issues, and developing an understanding of different cultures.").

[41] See, for example: Center on Education Policy, *Public Schools and Citizenship* (Washington, D.C.: July 1998), Available at: http://www.ctredpol.org/democracypublicschools/pubschool_citizen.pdf (schools give students the "opportunity to learn and respect different points of view, to disagree amicably, and to reach livable compromises").

manipulation and coercion."[42] Education promoting tolerance plays a key role in preparing citizens able to take on such active participation.

Providing students with opportunities to become directly involved in local politics or community activities, as well as in thoughtfully constructed simulations, can play an important role in developing their skills, knowledge, and commitment to civic participation. The ECS task force promotes "service learning" as a "significant pedagogy for helping students develop into good citizens because it provides both a context and method for practicing the requisite civic skills."[43] The League of Women Voters has likewise found that activity-based learning, such as organizing students to work together on a local policy issue of their choice, is particularly effective.[44] Such activities have lasting effects because they can instill a respect for and commitment to democracy that encourages continuing involvement after graduation.[45]

B. Inadequate Education & Civic Apathy Threaten Our Democracy

There is also a growing consensus among political scientists, economists, sociologists, and educational policy analysts that there has been a marked decline in civic participation in the United States in recent decades, and that lower educational attainment among students bears part of the blame for this phenomenon. The 1998

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[42] Gutmann, "Why Should Schools Care about Civic Education?," pp. 76-81.

[43] ECS, *Every Student a Citizen*, p. 18.

[44] "Civic Education and Knowledge--What Works: Democratizing Information," in *Representative Government: Charting the Health of American Democracy; A Report by the League of Women Voters*, Available at http://www.lwv.org/elibrary/pub/chad/chad_4c.html (describing several activities organized by local Leagues).

[45] For example, a 2001 report of the Center for Civic Education found that alumni of its "We the People The Citizen and the Constitution" program were considerably better informed about political issues and participated at higher rates than their 18-30 year old peers. (*Voting and Political Participation of We the People... The Citizen and the Constitution Alumni; Executive Summary, 2001*, Available at: www.civiced.org/eval_alumni_execsumm.html).

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a nationwide standardized test administered by the federal government, found that shockingly high numbers of students lack fundamental civics knowledge. For example, only 6 percent of eighth-graders could describe how a country benefits from having a constitution and only 30 percent of high school seniors knew that the United States Supreme Court uses judicial review to protect minority rights.[46]

A disturbingly high number of students drop out of high school or leave with grossly inadequate literacy skills. Justice DeGrasse found that in New York City, 40 percent of those who enter the ninth grade do not graduate from high school and the "majority of the City's public school students leave high school unprepared for more than low-paying work, unprepared for college, and unprepared for the duties placed upon them by a democratic society."[47] Similar findings have been made by courts in Kentucky, Maryland, New Jersey, North Carolina, Wyoming and many other states that in recent years have similarly held that many students are not receiving an adequate education that will prepare them to function productively as citizens in a modern democratic society.[48]

Concern for society's failure to provide students the level of skills they need to compete in the global economy and to function productively as capable citizens led in the late 1980s to the beginning of a nationwide movement to raise

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[46] David J. Hoff, "Beyond Basics, Civics Eludes U.S. Students," *Education Week*, November 24, 1999. The fact that formal civic education today comprises only a single semester course on government compared to as many as three courses in democracy, civics and government that were common in the 1960s may partially explain this outcome. (Carnegie, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, p. 5).

[47] *Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. v. State of New York*, 187 Misc. 2d, p. 68.

[48] For a detailed discussion of the recent education adequacy cases, see Michael A. Rebell, "Education Adequacy, Democracy and the Courts," in Timothy Ready, Christopher Edley, Jr. and Catherine E. Snow, eds. *Achieving High Educational Standards for All Conference Summary* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2002), pp. 218-267, Also available at: http://books.nap.edu/books/0309083036/html/218.html.

educational standards. In the past two decades, 49 of the 50 states have adopted rigorous standards-based education reforms including, in most states, requirements for civics-related skills, knowledge, and values.[49] For example, in developing New York's new Regents' Learning Standards, the Regents' Council on Curriculum and Assessment concluded that to properly function as voters and jurors and undertake other civic responsibilities, students required:

- Knowledge about the functioning of [this country's] system of government;
- The ability to analyze and reason about the evidence presented for different points of view or policy ideas; and
- The analytic ability to work from various kinds of data or evidence about issues to make judgments and decisions in the voting booth and as citizens.[50]

Americans today seem cynical and apathetic about participating in politics and policy-making. The number of citizens voting in U.S. presidential elections fell to 51 percent of eligible voters in 2000, continuing a long-term downward trend that began in the early 1960s when turnout was nearly 63 percent.[51] Given the low level of past preparation for effective civic engagement by the schools, it is not surprising

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[49] Kenneth W. Tolo, project director. *The Civic Education of American Youth: From State Policies to School District Practices* (Austin, TX: Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, University of Texas-Austin, 1999) pp. 23-25, Available at: http://www.civiced.org/ceay_civedpolicyreport.pdf (summarizing civics in state standards).

[50] The Learning Standards adopted by the Regents require students to develop high-level cognitive and analytic skills in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The standards for social studies specifically promote analytic and evaluative skills as well as an understanding of the roles of the citizen in the American constitutional democracy, and the "Civics, Citizenship and Government" standard requires students to understand "the necessity for establishing governments; the governmental system of the United States and other nations; theUnited States Constitution; the basic civic values of American constitutional democracy; and the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship, including avenues of participation." (From plaintiffs' appeal brief to the New York State Court of Appeals in *Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. v. State of New York*, filed by CFE on January 31, 2003, Available at: www.cfequity.org/cfebrief013103PDF.pdf, pp. 35-36).

[51] In 1996, the turn-out had been less than 50 percent, the lowest turnout in a Presidential election since 1924. Voter turn-out statistics in federal Presidential and Congressional elections from 1960-2000 are available on the Federal Election Commission website at: www.fec.gov/elections.html.

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that the disengagement of young people from politics and voting is even more pronounced. While Americans between ages 18 and 30 make up the largest bloc of eligible voters in the country (at about 25 percent),[52] abysmally low (and increasingly declining) numbers in this age group actually vote. According to a recently published Carnegie Corporation of New York report, youth voter turnout has dropped by at least 13 percent since 1972; this equates to less than a 13 percent voter turnout among eligible young voters.[53] Among the youngest voters those between the ages of 18 and 24 the voting rate has dropped by a third over the same three decades.[54]

In addition to inadequate preparation in school, social scientists identified several other causes of the apparent disinterest of today's youth in politics and public affairs. First, there is a large and growing disconnect between young people and politicians: there is an almost-complete neglect by political candidates of issues relevant to youth, paralleled by a perception by potential young voters that their issues and their votes are unimportant and undervalued by politicians and the government. The Carnegie report and many others describe this divide as "a chicken-and-egg dilemma" in which youth fail to vote because an absence of their issues in political campaigns, while politicians focus on older voters because young people vote in low numbers.[55] In the last decade, young Americans' confidence that government officials listen to "people like me" has reached its lowest points

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[52] Data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE), as reported by the Youth Vote Coalition website (www.youthvote.org/info/factsheet.htm) and referenced in Alison Byrne Fields, *The Youth Challenge: Participating in Democracy* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003), p. 1.

[53] Alison Byrne Fields, *The Youth Challenge: Participating in Democracy* (New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003), p. 1.

[54] Ibid., p. 3.

[55] Ibid., p. 4.

ever: only four out of every 10 people under 25 believe politicians care what they think, compared to almost three-quarters of the same age group 50 years ago.[56]

Harvard University professor Robert Putnam believes that voter apathy is symptomatic of a more deep-rooted cynicism about civic participation that pervades American society:

> During the last third of the twentieth century formal membership in organizations in general has edged downward by perhaps 10-20 percent. More important, active involvement in clubs and other voluntary associations has collapsed at an astonishing rate, more than halving most indexes of participation within barely a few decades most Americans no longer spend much time in community organizations we've stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as officers and stopped going to meetings. [57]

Putnam attributes this severe decline in civic participation to a loss of "social capital," a substantial weakening of the social bonds that hold individual communities and the larger society together. Others, including Lisbeth B. Schorr, William Julius Wilson, and Jean Bethke Eshtain, have attributed this phenomenon to the breakdown of the traditional family unit, lessened involvement in religious and other community institutions, and the impact of large government and the welfare state. A useful way to understand and react to the social trends that Putnam has identified is to view them as reflecting a loss of civic commitment and a lack of civic competence.[58] The growing complexity of modern life has caused many people to leave public policy issues to the experts and the professionals; the

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[56] Ibid, p. 12.

[57] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 63.

[58] The concept of "civic competence" is discussed in Stephen L. Elkin and Karol Edward Soltan, eds., *Citizen Competence and Democratic Institutions* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999).

striving for personal fulfillment and individual wealth accumulation has undermined commitment to communal activities; and the media's emphasis on entertainment and confrontation rather than information and involvement, combined with inadequate educational achievement by large numbers of students, has led to pervasive disengagement from political and communal affairs.

Unsurprisingly, much of the recent focus on revitalizing civic participation has focused on local public schools. While many perceive a major decline in the relevance of traditional family, church, and political institutions in young people's everyday lives, public schools are one of the few remaining institutions common to every community in the country. In addition to being responsible for providing young people the educational skills they need to be competent citizens, schools also serve in many places as a natural locus for community-building. Public schools, one report concludes, "are the only institutions with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every young person in the country."[59] For this reason, it is a critical societal imperative to preserve, improve, and adequately fund a strong system of public education that will enable our democratic society to thrive successfully long into the future.

It is a critical societal imperative to preserve, improve, and adequately fund a strong system of public education that will enable our democratic society to thrive.

In contemporary America, the local school district remains a place where individual citizens can deliberate face-to-face on issues of profound public significance.[60] Moreover, the school setting is institutionally committed to rational

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[59] Carnegie Corporation, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, p. 5.

[60] "As neighborhoods, churches and even nuclear families have become more ephemeral and less significant in the lives of children in the United States, there are fewer and fewer places where the continuous and close relationships that characterize well-functioning communities can be encountered in our common life." Gregory A. Smith, "Introduction: Schools and the Maintenance of

discourse and to promoting positive ideals in the interest of educating the next generation.[61] Because virtually all Americans recognize a vested interest in education everyone, after all, has gone to school and will send their children there many recognize the importance of public schools to the future of their children and their communities. Furthermore, research shows that children begin to develop political views and interests by age 9.[62] Apart from families, only schools can provide children the knowledge and skills they need at this critical stage in their social development.

Education reform, therefore, has the potential not only for giving students the analytic skills, and knowledge they need to function as capable citizens, but they also are the prime locus for building social bonds and countering the serious erosion of civic engagement that confronts the society at large. Moreover, researchers contend, public schools are in an excellent position at this point in time to build on the positive trends in youth civic engagement that have emerged recently. While the youth voting rate has been depressed, young people's participation in a variety of other civic functions volunteering, organizing, and engaging in events like protests, demonstrations, or boycotts are in fact quite high. In 2000, over 80 percent of college freshmen, for example, had taken part in volunteer activities at some point in their lives a 13 percent increase from just 11

Community," in Gregory A. Smith, ed., *Public Schools That Work: Creating Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 1, 7. The importance of face-to-face interchanges for the functioning of participatory democracy is further discussed in Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 242-251; Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) pp. 8-22; and Michael Walzer, "Civility and Civic Virtue in Contemporary America," in Michael Walzer, *Radical Principles: Reflections of an Unreconstructed Democrat* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

[61] "Education is always cast as the means whereby citizens of a society learn to live with one another. It always reflects a society's views of what is excellent, worthy and necessary." Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Democracy and the Politics of Difference," *The Responsive Community* 16 (Spring 1994).

[62] Carnegie Corporation, *The Civic Mission of Schools*, p. 12.

years before.[63] Equally remarkable, young people today are significantly more tolerant than their parents' and grandparents' generations, and are much more likely to value diversity, socialize with people from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, and to support rights for minorities, gays and lesbians, and immigrants.[64]

In an effort to understand the perception of students, parents, teachers and concerned community representatives on the problems and the potential of public schools today in meeting the challenges of civic engagement, the Campaign for Fiscal Equity and the League of Women Voters of New York State conducted a state-wide series of public engagement forums. The somewhat surprising and hopeful perspectives that emerged from those forums will be discussed in the next section.

[63] Ibid., pp. 17-19.

[64] Ibid., p. 18.

PART III

THE PERSPECTIVE OF NEW YORK STUDENTS & THE PUBLIC

INPUT FROM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ON HOW SCHOOLS CAN BETTER PREPARE STUDENTS FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Why are young people so disengaged from politics? What issues do matter to them? What do schools need to teach to prepare students to be capable citizens, and what kind of a job are they doing now? To obtain the views of students, parents, teachers and community members to the basic civic engagement issues raised by the court cases and the social science research, CFE and the League of Women Voters of New York State initiated an extensive, statewide series of public engagement during the fall and winter of the 2002-2003 school year. Two focus groups were held in the New York City and Rochester metropolitan areas, and eight evening forums were held in eight high schools in a broad range of areas of the state: Albany, Brentwood, Elmira, Rochester, Watertown, Manhattan, and Queens. Overall, 500 participants took part in these events, with attendance ranging from 16 at Watertown High School in the North Country to over 100 at the School of the Future in Manhattan.

On the major issues, the responses from students and their parents, teachers, and neighbors were strikingly similar in each of the diverse urban, suburban and rural districts we visited. Participants readily acknowledged that students by and large were apathetic about participating in electoral politics; defined "civic engagement" in broad terms; agreed on the types of skills students needed for civic engagement; and felt the schools were not doing a good enough job in instilling these skills. We also received a number of insightful suggestions on specific steps schools could take to promote students' interest and abilities to become civically engaged.

Each forum began with a 20-30 minute facilitated panel discussion of 8-10 high school students regarding their perceptions of their peers' attitudes on voting, jury service, and political issues. This discussion served as a kick-off point for 90-minute small group break-out sessions in which other students, parents, teachers, and community members reacted to the student panels' comments and then further explored three specific discussion questions:

1. *What does civic participation mean?*
2. *What are the knowledge, skills, and values that students need in order to become engaged, capable citizens?*
3. *How well are our schools doing in preparing students to become engaged and capable citizens, and how could they do better?*

The views expressed by the student panelists on their generation's interest and involvement in politics were remarkably similar to the findings of the national polls and the social science literature. The most common response to why young people have little interest in politics, candidates, and current political issues offered by students in nearly every community was that politicians fail to address issues important to young people or even to seek out their concerns and opinions. As one New York City student asked, "Why should we care about politics if politicians don't reach out to us?" A suburban student noted that young people recognize an intentional focus by politicians on "seniors and soccer moms." Another student observed, "They're only talking about Medicaid." Many students also said that their peers are turned off or disillusioned by negative, confusing, or shallow campaign tactics, especially television commercials that rarely focus on any issues, let alone theirs. Consequently, many had trouble seeing political issues as relevant to their lives and thought that their voices were ignored.

Disillusionment about the political process was reflected in the oft-repeated statement that their votes do not matter, or worse, are not even counted. A number of students specifically referred to the 2000 presidential elections in explaining this perception. Some students in both urban and suburban schools believed that the responsibility for teens' lack of interest lies with adult apathy: since many parents do not vote, they said, their children often share this apathy. "Students learn from what they see," a New York City student commented. A few students were, however, sharply critical of their peers' apathy. One New York City student made an impassioned statement that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement had fought and died to give the current generation of minority students the right to vote and that students, therefore, had no right to scorn or neglect these opportunities.

Some students said that the problem was not that their generation lacks an interest in politics, but that young people often lack the knowledge or confidence to become civically involved. Some said they felt too uninformed about issues to form an opinion; others said they lacked the skills to impact issues they care about. Several students said that teenagers do not understand the benefits or relevance of voting and politics to their lives, in part because they have not learned enough in school about the electoral process and its importance. Despite this, some students argued that they and many of their classmates want to learn how to engage in political action, yet need to feel more informed about the issues and the political process.

After exploring the roots of students' political apathy, the facilitators pressed the panelists to consider whether there are, in fact, issues that are important to them and about which students can or should become more politically engaged. Interestingly, although a number of students mentioned certain national and local issues such as the economy, the environment, drugs, racism, and immigrant issues,

most of the student panelists' answers focused on concerns involving their schools and education in general.

In almost every community, students ranked school funding, resource deficiencies, and school facility problems among their top concerns. In Elmira and Watertown, for example, students were particularly concerned with the rising drop-out rate resulting from the pressure of the Regents' Learning Standards and for classmates who might fall by the wayside as a result. One student's descriptive comments well-summarized his peers' concern with education budget cuts. "Students are like seeds in a garden, and high school is the water that enables them to grow," he said. "The state is hindering our growth." Other education issues cited by students in several communities included inconsistent disciplinary policies, a need for more after-school and student leadership opportunities, and potential cutbacks in government-funded financial aid for college.

"Students are like seeds in a garden, and high school is the water than enables them to grow," one student said. "The state is hindering our growth."

What Is Civic Participation?

When asked to define civic participation, virtually all of the participants in the break-out groups at the forums agreed that the concept went well beyond voting and serving on a jury to encompass a very broad concept of civic engagement. In addition to voting and jury service, participants in every single community responded with remarkable agreement that responsible citizens must also share and discuss their knowledge and passions with others, and be personally responsible for becoming informed on political issues, processes, and governmental actions. Every group also included community service and volunteering in its

definition. Most groups also included voicing opinions to policy makers through letter-writing, attending public meetings, and other actions; engaging in grassroots activities and organizing friends and neighbors for change; and reading and watching the news to stay informed on current events.

The implication of this strong finding was that to be a good voter or a good juror, one must also be an active citizen who has an awareness of his or her community's issues and needs, and who feels a personal obligation to become involved in sustaining and improving community life. Despite their general state of apathy on broadly defined political issues, students and their parents, teachers and neighbors were quick to recognize the need for all citizens to be actively involved in civic activities. This outcome is an important endorsement of democratic theory and has significant implications for follow-up actions (which we will describe in the conclusion of this report).

What Knowledge, Skills, and Values Do Students Need for Civic Engagement?

In response to this question, participants statewide largely agreed with both Justice DeGrasse and the overwhelming thrust of social science literature on what knowledge and skills students need to be effective citizens. In general, the forum participants and researchers concur that students need critical thinking, reasoning, and analytical skills to be capable, effective citizens in the 21st century. Given the broad consensus on the range of civic activities and issues in which a good citizen should be engaged, this conclusion was hardly surprising. To illustrate the importance of critical analytical skills in today's society, participants in several forums cited the need for such skills to make sense of things like "the barrage of TV attack ads" and to cut through "media distortions" of news and current events, in order to understand the significance of political issues and the extent to which these issues affect their everyday lives.

Participants at every forum agreed that good communication abilities including public speaking, writing, listening, and presentation skills are among the most important things students should learn in school. Other necessary skills frequently mentioned included high school level reading and writing, research skills, leadership and collaborative abilities, proficiency with computers and technology, and good organizational and decision-making skills. Several groups emphasized the need for schools to better teach the real-world application and relevance of academic subject matter. Others felt that schools should also teach life skills, including job-readiness and career preparation, parenting skills, and other positive social and behavioral skills.

There was widespread agreement that students require a substantial base of knowledge in order to be capable citizens. Most forums listed knowledge of U.S. history and government, economics and finance, state and local government and community issues, and constitutional and civil rights as the most important needs for students to be effective voters, jurors, and involved citizens. Several groups also cited knowledge of foreign languages, current events, science, and math as important needs.

While there was broad agreement that there are a core set of values that all citizens should share, there was some debate over whether schools can (or should) teach values or whether they must be taught at home or somewhere else outside the classroom. The most frequently cited core values included tolerance and open-mindedness, respect, and personal responsibility. Other values mentioned included cultural awareness; self-confidence and self-respect; conviction, initiative, and perseverance; freedom and democracy; and concern for the collective good.

How Are Schools Doing in Preparing Students to Be Civically Engaged?

A constant theme in most of the discussions was that schools could better prepare students for civic engagement if they were adequately funded. While several of the groups thought their schools were doing as well as could be expected given the current state of resources, there was strong agreement that, without adequate funding and resources, schools are limited in their ability to provide their students with the skills and knowledge they need to meet the state's challenging Regents Learning Standards and to obtain the skills, knowledge and values they need to be capable citizens. As one participant in a rural upstate community stated, "Dole out the money *before* you make the standards."

Of particular significance was a repeated explanation that small classes, good teachers, and guidance counselors are necessary to permit the high level of student-teacher interaction needed to develop the analytic and communication skills needed for effective civic engagement. Similarly, there was major emphasis on developing students' civic values and a spirit of community within schools through extracurricular activities, field trips, community service programs, more hands-on applied learning activities in the classroom. Particularly poignant comments were made in this regard by students at Forest Hills High School, a heavily overcrowded school, who complained that their limited school day resulting from split-session scheduling precluded many extracurricular activities and "bonding" of the school community.

The need for schools to give students a sense of empowerment and confidence also came across in most forums. Many felt that schools were not doing a good enough job in giving students the self-confidence or skills needed to become actively involved in their communities. In many forums, teachers and students cited preparation for the Regents exams as being an obstacle to teaching and learning some of the knowledge, skills, and values needed for civic engagement: the required curriculum and emphasis on "teaching to the tests" leave little time or

resources for discussion of current events, extracurricular activities, community service projects, or a more hands-on approach to engaging students in civic life.

Next Steps

At the end of each forum, participants brainstormed ideas for specific next steps that their community could take to follow up on the forum. Four groups shared a desire to organize similar forums for other members of the school community, and to possibly bring CFE and the League back for more community forums or classroom discussions on the issues raised during the forum. Many of the students involved felt that these forums were empowering, as illustrated by one's observation that "People actually listened to us. The organization asked for our opinions and listened when we gave them."

Other proposed steps included inviting elected officials into the school on a regular basis to give students the opportunity to express their concerns and form a real-world connection to their legislators; creating more collaboration between parents, communities, businesses, and schools; and improving community-based and experiential learning opportunities for students. Some students also hoped to make an effort to share issues raised in the forum with their classmates, families, and other members of the community.

Several schools proposed specific steps to make students' voices heard by policy makers, including encouraging students to attend school board and other public meetings, to write to their legislators, to sign petitions, and to attend the annual education lobby day in Albany. At the Watertown forum, district officials recommended adding a non-voting student member to its board of education, and its social studies department chair recommended adding an in-depth unit on local politics and governance in the district's Participation in Government classes. At the School of the Future, a New York City high school, proposals to add student representatives to the school leadership team were also discussed.

CONCLUSION

Effective democracy depends on capable and committed citizens. Since the nation's founding more than two hundred years ago, democracy in the United States has been sustained by the willingness and ability of citizens to engage in political action, to make the government responsive to their needs and aspirations, and to participate productively and actively in their communities. Extension of the franchise and civic responsibilities beyond the original eligible elite of white male landowners means that the public schools now have a critical responsibility to prepare *all* students to be active, capable citizens if our democratic society is to survive and to thrive in the 21st century.

In CFE's **"Today's Students, Tomorrow's Citizens"** forums, students across the State of New York made clear that they recognize the importance of preparing for their responsibilities as citizens. They are determined to meet the Regents' challenging academic standards, and are eager to become more involved in volunteer, service and extracurricular activities that will develop the social bonds and interactive skills they need to be civically engaged. Although most of the students who attended the forums are among the highest-achieving and most civically engaged students in their schools, significantly, these students expressed deep concern for those of their peers who were at-risk of not meeting the standards, and they repeatedly asked us to return to undertake more forums like this so that many more of the students in their schools could become engaged with these issues.

The students identified two prerequisites schools need to better prepare students to function effectively as civic participants:

- An adequate level of funding that will provide all students the qualified teachers, smaller classes, textbooks and computers, and other resources they need to develop the high level of cognitive skills

and knowledge they need to meet the Regents Learning Standards and to become capable voters and jurors.

- A rich array of extra-curricular, community service, hands-on and experiential learning opportunities, as well as school-based community-building activities that will help them develop the democratic values and civic engagement skills they need to become capable citizens.

The student insights at our forums validated John Dewey's classic view that the best way to prepare students to be capable citizens is by giving them practical experience with democratic processes as part of their daily school activities. Dewey wrote that schools are a miniature community in which students should be active participants in a democratic process, rather than passive recipients of abstract information. He sought to shape both the educational environment and the formal curriculum to enhance the student's ability to participate in the political life of the community, broadly defined.[65]

It is clear that the way to overcome the widespread political apathy of today's youth is to engage them actively in academic and extracurricular activities on issues that matter to them including very often issues in their own schools, families, and communities. These experiences will prepare them to be more politically active and generally more civically engaged as adults.

The active student involvement in the public engagement forums described in this report is an example of one such activity that can engage youth around critical public policy issues of direct relevance to their everyday lives and future plans. The student participants came alive with opinions, observations, and ideas sparked by a genuine sense that their voices mattered in an ongoing process to

[65] Dewey's views are further described in: John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1929) and JoAnn Boydston, ed., *The middle works, 1899-1924: John Dewey* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983).

improve their schools. In addition to the student participation in this initiative, CFE has also organized a series of high school student conferences during and after the trial to gain student input, raise youths' awareness of the issues raised in *CFE v. State*, and provide an all-too-rare opportunity for students to discuss and debate their rights. In the next phase of CFE's public engagement project, CFE and the League of Women Voters of New York State plan in the 2003-2004 school year to expand our school-based public engagement activities to involve students in working actively with parents, teachers, and school leadership teams to analyze their schools' funding needs, and to work together to develop educational accountability plans that will commit the entire school community to creating a climate for teaching and learning that will result in demonstrable improvements in student achievement.

Over two centuries ago, the nation's founders had a robust vision for a new type of citizen capable of undertaking the many unique, important responsibilities required in a strong representative democracy. At the dawn of the 21st century and especially since September 11 that vision is more important than ever. Public education is the common institution most able to prepare today's students to tackle the challenges they will face in the future. Assuring adequate resources for all and mobilizing student interest and involvement in their schools and communities is the best way to realize the power and strength of our democratic society.

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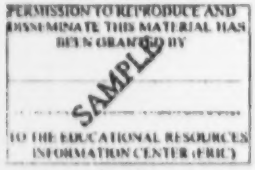
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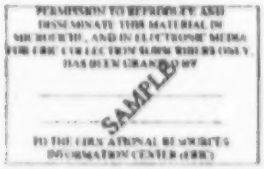

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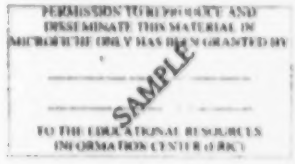

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